

Why Poland's new Holocaust law is a mockery

By Menachem Levine - - Tuesday, February 20, 2018

ANALYSIS/OPINION:

The French philosopher Voltaire said, "History is nothing but a pack of tricks that we play upon the dead." Poland's new Holocaust law is yet another pack of tricks played upon the millions of murdered Jews in the Holocaust.

The new law makes it illegal to accuse Poland of being complicit with Nazi crimes in the Holocaust. In addition, it outlaws the use of the phrase "Polish death camps." Both actions are punishable by prison sentences of up to three years.

Besides undeniable historical evidence, as a grandchild of four Polish Holocaust survivors, I can state based on their painful first-hand accounts, that for the Polish parliament and president to pass such a law is a disgrace and a mockery.

In support of the law, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki tweeted, "Auschwitz-Birkenau is not a Polish name, and Arbeit Macht Frei is not a Polish phrase."

That is true. Calling the concentration camps "Polish camps" as President Obama and others did is a misrepresentation. It is a historic fact that the Germans initiated, planned and built the slave labor and extermination camps in Poland. For this reason, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Israel said: "There is no doubt that the term 'Polish death camps' is a historical misrepresentation. Yad Vashem will continue to support research aimed at exposing the complex truth regarding the attitude of the Polish population towards the Jews during the Holocaust."

It is also true that Poland and the Polish people suffered under Nazi Germany. In the occupation that followed Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939, Poles were starved and enslaved with brutal ferocity. Tens of thousands of Poles were kicked off their land to make room for Germans, who rounded up intellectuals and

political elites, prohibited speaking Polish in some areas, and closed or destroyed Polish cultural and educational institutions. Aside from the over 3 million Polish Jews murdered in the Holocaust, it is estimated that the Germans killed at least 1.9 million non-Jewish Polish civilians during World War II.

Furthermore, about 6,700 Poles were recognized by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial for rescuing Jews, which is the largest number from any country. There certainly were Poles who were indescribably brave and kind. They risked their lives and the lives of their loved ones, by sheltering the hunted Jews in their homes and barns, underground and in bunkers, and they did so for years.

Nevertheless, Yad Vashem makes it clear that it was Poles who made the Nazi Holocaust in Poland possible. Without the cooperation of the local citizenry, sometimes passively observing and many times enthusiastically supportive, a program of mass murder would have been impossible. "Restrictions on statements by scholars and others regarding the Polish people's direct or indirect complicity with the crimes committed on their land during the Holocaust are a serious distortion," Yad Vashem said.

Nearly all of the death camps in occupied Europe were built in Poland. There were no crematoria or gas chambers in occupied France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, Norway, Denmark, Czechoslovakia or any other nation invaded by Nazi troops. Auschwitz, Birkenau, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, Treblinka and others were built in Poland. Why?

The answer is that the Nazis knew that Poland had been anti-Semitic for centuries and the Germans were convinced that the Poles would not protest against death camps for Jews on their soil. As history shows, they were correct.

Even before the German invasion in 1939, hostility toward Jews was a mainstay of the Polish regime and the Polish Catholic Church. In the 1930s, the national boycott of Jewish businesses and advocacy for their confiscation was promoted by the Endecja party in Poland, which introduced the term "Christian shop." My grandmother's store suffered in the late 1930s from the boycott, which impoverished her and her family, among many others in the Jewish community. The Poles certainly did not need the Germans to teach them to hate Jews.

Knowing the Polish anti-Semitic viewpoints, the German commanders recruited Polish police to guard the ghettos and Polish railway workers to deport Jews to the killing centers. Individual Poles betrayed or hunted down Jews in hiding and actively participated in the plunder of Jewish property.

My late grandmother disguised herself as a Polish Catholic in order to save her life and that of her infant daughter. Over that time, she heard many Poles discussing how they hunted Jews in the forests to kill them or to turn them in to the Nazis.

A post-Holocaust example, which makes the case of Polish anti-Semitism without Nazi involvement, is the tragic story of the 200 Jewish survivors who returned to their homes in Kielce following the war. Back in Kielce, they began to rebuild their lives. They established a synagogue, a community center and an orphanage. All this came to a standstill on July 4, 1946, when a blood libel spread through the town, falsely accusing the Jews of kidnapping a Christian child. With a vengeance, Kielce's Polish residents descended on the Jewish area.

The police and soldiers watched as the mob attacked the Jews, murdering 42 Holocaust survivors and injuring scores more. The remaining Jews realized they had no option but to flee the place they had believed they could find a measure of peace and freedom, the Nazi-free Poland. Clearly, they were mistaken. These Poles were murderous anti-Semites whether the Nazis were there or not.

This Polish anti-Semitism caused all four of my grandparents to leave Poland after the Holocaust and never return.

As a teenager, I once visited Poland to visit the ancient Jewish sites and see the death camps. At the time, my grandparents asked me why I would ever want to go back to a place soaked with Jewish blood. They referred not only to the Nazi atrocities that took place on the soil, but also to the country Poland, which both allowed and assisted in the Holocaust.

Spanish Essayist, George Santayana, famously said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." History demands truth and not tricks. And so do my murdered relatives.

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